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PSALM 24 : AN INTERPRETATION.

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*To Yahweh belongs the world and all it contains,
The earth and all who dwell in it;
He it was who founded it upon the sea,
And established it upon the floods.*

*Who may ascend into the hill of Yahweh ?
Who may stand in his holy place ?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who sets not his soul on evil,
And who takes no false oath.*

*He shall receive blessing from Yahweh
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.
This is the company of those who seek him,
Who seek thy Redeemer,[†] O Jacob:*

*Lift up, ye gates, your heads,
Be ye lifted up, ye primeval doors,
That the glorious King may come in!
Who is the glorious King ?
Yahweh, the strong and mighty one,
Yahweh, the mighty in battle.*

*Lift up, ye gates, your heads,
Be ye lifted up, ye primeval doors,
That the glorious King may come in!
Who is the glorious King ?
Yahweh Sabaoth, he is the glorious King!*

THE psalm consists of three parts. The first of them is a hymn, which proclaims in brief words that the earth belongs to Yahweh because he created it. This argument for God's right-

[†] Read something like *podekha*.

ful control over the world, arising out of his creation of it, is a well-known motive in other hymns also.² But from all the wonders of creation which might be mentioned here, the poet selects only one—the one which seems to him the most wondrous, that God has founded the earth upon the sea. This thought is based upon an assumption which was widespread in the ancient East, namely, that a great body of water lies underneath the earth; this is the “sea,” the “floods.” The psalm is originally, as it seems, a naive answer to the question whence the springs in the soil come; they gush forth from a huge water reservoir underneath the earth. And the ancient further reasoned: things that float upon the water usually waver and are unstable; but the earth, although resting upon the water, stands firm and immovable—it is the firmest of all things.

This is the childish theory of a generation long since passed away. But the spirit of such words is imperishable. They are the expression of a mind that shows true astonishment at the wonders of the universe (and astonishment is the beginning of all science); of a mind that conceives the wondrous things which fill the world as a visible manifestation of a supreme wisdom which governs all.

But the two stanzas that follow are of an entirely different kind; they contain a question, and an answer, and at the end a benediction. There are a number of parallel passages, which are divided in the same order, as Ps. 15; Isa. 33:14–16; *cf.* also Mic. 6:6ff. In all these the same peculiar literary form is found. Even the original manner of presenting this form may be imagined; it is the antiphony of layman and priest. The layman appears at the entrance of the sanctuary and asks the priest the question: Who is worthy of entering the holy place? The priest answers by enumerating God's demands, and then concludes with a benediction according to the privilege of the priest. The whole is therefore a liturgy performed as the festal company enters the sanctuary. This sanctuary at which the liturgy was sung by the alternating choirs, called in the psalm “the hill of Yahweh,” “the holy place,” is undoubtedly the temple on

² *Cf.* Pss. 89; 11; 74:15; 95:4.

Mount Zion, as is, I think, always the case in the psalms. For the psalter represents Jerusalem tradition; in the psalms which speak of a holy place the temple of Jerusalem is always meant.

The question who may enter God's sanctuary, participate in the service, and thus secure for himself divine mercy, has been of high importance since primæval times in all religions. The answers to this question, given at different times and by different circles and persons, have a long history in Israel as well as in other nations. At an early time in Israel, as elsewhere, the proper ritual and ceremonial conditions were emphasized. As he who wishes to enter the king's palace must conform to the ceremony of the court, so men at first conceived that in God's house also a fixed ceremonial should prevail: if he would enter, one must be ritually clean. Furthermore, it seemed necessary and right that "none should appear empty"³ before God any more than before the king.

At a later period this required "cleanness" was understood in a deeper sense. Especially in Israel a powerful religious reformation took place, by means of which sacrifices and ceremonies were entirely put aside and replaced by true, active piety and morality.

Wherewith shall I meet Yahweh,
And bow myself before the high God?
Shall I meet him with whole burnt-offerings,
With calves of a year old?
It is made plain to you, O man, what is good,
What Yahweh requires of you:
To act justly,
To love faithfulness,
And to walk humbly before your God.⁴

This great idea of the prophets' preaching echoes in our psalm. Sacrifices and ceremonies are not mentioned; the things required are true moral religion, purity of deed and thought.

This "cleanness" which God requires is indicated by two examples: the pious man "lifts up his heart" to God alone, and does not set his soul on evil. Perjury also would be a sin, for God's holy name is not to be invoked falsely.

³Exod. 23:15.

⁴Mic. 6:6, 8.

Then comes the benediction with which the priest blesses the procession entering at this moment: The pious man shall receive blessing and righteousness from God who is his helper. "Righteousness," a word which in this meaning has become unknown to us, is the righteousness that God confers by his judgment; he who has the qualities enumerated in the psalm, is pronounced "righteous" by God, *i. e.*, God recognizes him as his faithful, good servant, and then blesses him with all good things. This is the reason why the righteousness conferred by God and the divine blessing are conjoined here, and in other similar passages. The psalmist recapitulates the foregoing with these words: Such are all truly pious men who seek God.⁵

The third part of the psalm resembles the second in many respects. Here again question and answer are sung by alternating voices; and the scene of this liturgy also, in which the gates of the sanctuary are addressed, is laid at the gates of the holy place. Yet the situation is not altogether the same. There the entering choir approaches God, while here it is assumed that God is among them: Yahweh is to enter his sanctuary; God will not disdain to dwell hereafter among men at this place. The primæval doors—thus they sing—are to be lifted up, in order to receive the High and Sublime One, the glorious King. Now comes the question from the sanctuary: Who is this glorious King? As an answer Yahweh's name is given, and his glory is praised: He is the strong and mighty one, the mighty in battle. This glorification of Yahweh as the god of war—the Greeks would say, as Ares—is an echo from the ancient times of Israel; the New Testament has no such idea of God. Yet we can appreciate the stirring poetry of this warlike element in Israel's religion.

The second strophe of this portion of the psalm is a solemn, word-for-word repetition of the first; its only difference is that here at the end, instead of the previous circumlocution, the final and definite answer is given, the real name of God—Yahweh Sabaoth. This is the crowning utterance which the poet has

⁵ This expression "to seek God" was from early times used of worshiping and consulting the deity at the holy place.

kept until the end. The fact that in cases like this special stress is laid upon the *name* is not readily understood by the modern reader. Its explanation lies in the fact that in early times, in Israel and among all nations, names, and especially names of gods, were most highly honored. It was believed that the god could be summoned by pronouncing his name, and the hostile powers were defeated by the use of his name. These gates of the temple, hitherto closed, open themselves when the name Yahweh Sabaoth is pronounced.

We know that in this very name the warlike character of Yahweh was expressed. Yahweh Sabaoth (*i. e.*, "Yahweh of Hosts") was the commander of armies in the field. And we see from this passage what enthusiasm there was for this name: with it ancient Israel went forth to war and victory and death.

This name is at the same time a clue to the situation of this poem. We are told that this name was the special *name of the God of the ark*,⁶ and we may therefore assume that the poem was sung when the ark entered the sanctuary, undoubtedly that at Jerusalem. But on what occasion was it sung? May it have been when the ark, which in ancient times was carried to the seat of war as a palladium, was brought back to the temple? Or should we suppose an annual feast, celebrating the entrance of Yahweh into the temple? We cannot be sure, since we have no knowledge of such a feast. There were feasts at Jerusalem connected with the pilgrimages, but what was done by the priests at the holy place is not a matter of record.

These stanzas about the temple seem to be of a very early date, but they cannot be as early as the time of David and Solomon, because the temple here is considered "primæval."

Finally, it is a difficult question how the three parts of the psalm, which originally formed independent pieces, became joined together. We certainly are tempted to assume some kind of a relation between them. One naturally conjectures that they represent a festal hymn, sung at some great annual feast such as that of the new year or of the dedication of the temple.

⁶ 2 Sam. 6: 2.